

Reflections on "Work Hard, Play Hard"

Baccalaureate Address to the Class of 2008 May 24, 2008, Mead Memorial Chapel

Good afternoon. On behalf of the faculty and staff of the College, I extend a warm welcome to the Class of 2008, their parents, families, and friends as we mark an important transition in our seniors' lives.

Today we reflect on all the graduating seniors have experienced and accomplished over the past four years and on their contributions to our community and the world beyond the College. And we look ahead to the opportunities that await them as Middlebury alumni.

Let me begin, therefore, by telling you a few things about the Middlebury Class of 2008. There are 637 graduates in this class, 311 men and 326 women. Some 365 of you are graduating with honors, and 67 were elected to Phi Beta Kappa. The most popular majors for your class were economics, English, and international studies. One hundred and twelve of you double majored. About 81 percent of you—that's 520 students—studied at least one foreign language, and nearly 60 percent—or 371 students—studied abroad for at least one semester in 49 countries.

Members of your class have earned three Fulbright grants, a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship for research abroad, and one of only 10 Compton Mentor Environmental Fellowship awarded this year.

The scholarship and imagination of your class were vividly demonstrated a few weeks ago at the second annual College-wide symposium recognizing student research and creativity. More than 65 members of your class participated in that symposium, presenting the results of research on an amazing array of subjects including:

- Measuring the expansion of a supernova remnant
- A study of Jewish environmental ethics
- Contemporary Italian theater
- The economics of a clean-energy renaissance
- Child-nutrition programs in Haiti; and
- Possibilities of the Precision Bass

Another six from your class presented their research at the annual Christian A. Johnson Symposium in the History of Art and Architecture, which this year focused on "The Question of Collaboration."

A Middlebury education affords exceptional opportunities for students to take intellectual risks and to undertake original research and creative projects, often in partnership with a faculty mentor. One of your classmates won the 2008 Andrew E. Nuquist Award for Outstanding Student Research on a Vermont Topic for her work on farmland conservation easements in Addison County. This is the fourth consecutive year that a Middlebury student has won that award.

Another member of your class was part of a Middlebury team that won a national computer-programming contest both this year and last year. Yet another classmate's research was selected by the Council for Undergraduate Research for presentation at the Posters on the Hill symposium in Washington, D.C.

A Middlebury education emphasizes civic engagement as well as scholarship, and your class has demonstrated a remarkable commitment to volunteerism and community service. More than half of you contributed to the community through volunteer and service-learning projects, as well through *pro bono* consulting work. Six of the 10 Public Service Leadership Awards presented this year by the Alliance for Civic Engagement went to members of the Class of 2008, and a record 32 seniors were nominated for those awards.

It would be hard to gauge the full extent of your service to the local community and beyond. Some of you have served on local fire departments and rescue squads; traveled to New Orleans in the wake of hurricane Katrina to assist in the rebuilding effort; served as Big Brothers or Big Sisters to local children; worked with the John Graham Community Shelter providing meals and companionship to the homeless; helped Sudanese refugees settle into new homes in Vermont; or served as English instructors and translators for Spanish-speaking migrant farm workers living in Addison County.

Members of your class have been agents of change at the forefront of efforts to address one of the most crucial issues facing the world: climate change. Not only have you initiated or assisted with many efforts to promote sustainability, carbon neutrality, and energy efficiency on campus, but through grassroots organizations such as Step-It-Up, 350.org, 1Sky, and PowerShift, you are working to build support for concrete action around the country and the world. Largely because of your efforts, Middlebury was one of only four colleges in the country this year to receive the Campus Sustainability Leadership Award from the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education.

Some of you were involved in organizing the first Synergy retreat last fall, bringing leaders of a wide array of student organizations together to discuss issues of environmental and social justice.

You also helped to form the Justice League to foster collaboration among student groups committed to service and activism. Over the past academic year, the Justice League has been engaged in issues ranging from the Farm Bill to the crisis in Sudan and political

oppression in Burma. And you were among the founders of Middlebury's Iraq Study Group, which is dedicated to promoting intercultural understanding and conflict resolution.

Working in groups like these and through your daily interactions with students, faculty, and staff, you have shown a willingness to cross the boundaries of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation to address difficult issues. The example you have set in demonstrating how diversity can strengthen a community is truly inspiring.

Your achievements in the arts are impressive, as well. For example, one member of this class has studied with the Alvin Ailey dance troupe, and another was chosen to represent the New England region at the national gala of American College Dance.

A member of your class attended the European American Musical Alliance program in composition at the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris and was a finalist in the ASCAP Foundation Morton Gould Young Composer competition. Several of you wrote compositions that were performed by the College orchestra. Another member of your class won awards for best student documentary and for best overall student film in the Vermont Film Festival.

Eleven of you will be part of the Potomac Theatre Project's summer season in New York City. Two have had plays performed professionally, and another will be touring the country with the National Players classical touring company. Yet another senior was the National Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival scene design winner.

In athletics, too, you have excelled. Members of your class have earned 33 All American honors in intercollegiate sports and 122 all-NESCAC academic honors. Two Middlebury women in the Class of 2008 won individual NCAA titles. You played on teams that won 20 NESCAC championships and seven national titles for Middlebury over the past four years, including Middlebury's first national championships in rugby and men's soccer, a women's cross country NCAA title, and back-to-back NCAA championships in men's and women's hockey.

With your help, the football team captured its first outright NESCAC title this year. The men's basketball team had its best season ever, making its first NCAA tournament appearance. And you helped power the baseball team to its most successful season in Middlebury history in 2006 and its first NESCAC championship and NCAA tournament appearance.

We are enormously proud of all of you.

Of course, I can't overlook the contribution that members of your class made to the world by helping to launch earth-bound Quidditch as a recreational sport at Middlebury and a number of other campuses. Congratulations to the Middlebury Molleywobbles on their spectacular victory over Vassar at the Quidditch World Cup Fall Festival this past year.

All of these achievements continue the tradition of remarkable accomplishments by Middlebury graduates, so many of whom have moved onto bigger, more challenging things, armed with knowledge and skills imparted by their faculty mentors, classmates, and others with whom they have come in contact here during the past 4 years.

You will soon leave the artificiality of the Middlebury campus, often referred to on many idyllic liberal arts campuses like ours as "the bubble"...an overly protected environment that allows students, and indeed encourages them, to become blissfully unaware of things happening outside our small environs. Such blissful ignorance of the outer world tends to magnify one's trivial daily experiences. The elimination of trays in the dining halls, or losing McCullough social space and Proctor to renovation somehow takes on a level of importance equal to truly significant events, such as the recent cyclone in Myanmar or the massive earthquake in Sichuan Province, China.

This bubble is a double-edged sword: while it can lead students to become somewhat divorced from the realities of the world beyond Middlebury, its artificiality is also a great asset—an integral part of our students' learning experience. The bubble provides cover for students who are willing to take risks, to experiment, and to experience failure while learning important lessons along the way. This is no insignificant attribute of a Middlebury education, especially now given the profile of your generation.

Your generation, the so-called Millennials, are typically characterized as: goal-oriented, optimistic, hard-working, cheerful, earnest, deferential, cooperative team-players, and, perhaps a bit difficult for college administrators to believe, comfortable with authority(!). Yet, your generation is also known to be more risk-averse than previous generations, perhaps a consequence of spending a lot of your time growing up in structured, supervised, adult-organized activities. Thus, the bubble, though so thoroughly artificial, can provide the opportunity for many of you to do the unusual, to test some previously undeveloped components of your *persona* and intellect, and to experience failure without suffering great consequences.

We hope, of course, that during your four years here, we compensated for the artificiality of the bubble better than most other small liberal arts institutions. We are conscious of the need to strike that balance between being protective and recognizing that college is a time of transition from the semi-dependent world of young adults to the world of independence that comes with the next phase of life.

We try reaching that balance by providing numerous leadership opportunities on campus through established student organizations, residential life positions, and by encouraging students to create things from scratch.

We are doing it through the recent fine-tuning of our commons residential system. The modified system is based on the belief and principle that as students progress through their four years here, they should be expected to exercise more independence and control over their activities and actions, including where and with whom they should live.

We do it, too, through our athletics program. Coaches, by delegating authority to captains in their role as intermediaries between coach and teammates, create a culture of accountability and interdependence. Through their delegated authority, the captains have the opportunity to emerge as leaders, but, just as valuable, they also have the opportunity to screw up. Through learning how to lead, or failing to lead, one inevitably also learns about responsibility.

We also believe our rare approach to study abroad, which requires students who attend Middlebury's programs to direct-enroll in partner universities, study side-by-side with local students in the target language, and live with host families or with students from the local university, provides a valuable and rather stark antidote to the protected environment of Middlebury in ways that well prepare students for independence following graduation.

On balance, I believe Middlebury gets most things right when it comes to providing a protected learning environment on the one hand, and challenging our students to exercise judgment and independence, on the other. Yet, there are, of course, things we can do better.

I am going to be rather blunt in highlighting one of those things we need to work on, so please bear with me. My objective in engaging this difficult topic is to try to give some legitimate oomph to the message I wish to convey today to our graduating seniors—that the personal quest for an enriching and fulfilling life itself requires individuals to make deep commitments to building and sustaining their communities.

The issue I believe we have failed to address effectively is that of alcohol abuse and the consequences it has for individuals as well as for our community. Obviously, this is not a problem particular to Middlebury. But of course, simply because so many colleges and universities seem to exhibit paralysis on this topic does not mean we should accept irresponsible and self-destructive behavior.

We have been more fortunate than many peer institutions during the past few years in terms of the number of extreme incidents we have experienced as a result of extreme drinking, but that is hardly a consolation. Our dedicated health educators and student life colleagues have put together an extensive array of programming designed to inform our students of the risks and consequences of alcohol abuse, yet the behavior continues.

At the heart of the problem is the prevailing attitude one hears so frequently from students ... that it's OK, indeed normal, to drink heartily once, twice, or three times/week because one has worked so hard.

This approach to life in college is by no means new, nor is it limited to Middlebury. Glance at the *Ivy Gate* blog or student blogs at various NESCAC schools and one will come across numerous references to the *work hard, play hard* dimension to college life, and the seeming acceptance of the irresponsible behavior that such a culture creates. A few of the posts on those blogs might shock some of you, but it is representative, I think, of the attitudes that now pass as the norm.

The expression *work hard, play hard* itself is not a problem, of course. Who would argue with something that celebrates balance in one's life? Or fun? How the meaning and understanding of the term has changed, however, especially when it comes to life in college, is the problem.

Today, the "play hard" component of *work hard, play hard* includes a significant amount of what Princeton University President Shirley Tilghman has called "high-risk drinking," a polite term for binge drinking, usually involving hard alcohol. Binge drinking, for the less familiar, is defined as a male consuming five drinks at one sitting and a female four, usually within a four hour period.

In the olden days, according to several accounts from 50-something and 60-something alumni from some highly regarded party schools, the *play hard* component seemed far more benign, as it largely had to do with pranks, usually done outdoors, accompanied by hearty drinking that involved almost exclusively beer. There was little recollection, or mention, of the widespread "collateral damage" from the playing hard that has become the norm today.

The so-called collateral damage from irresponsible drinking is all too familiar to students, staff, and administrators who must regularly, literally and figuratively, clean up the mess. Dorm and property damage, disrespect of staff and fellow students, fighting, and sexual assaults are just some of the all-too-common incidents associated with alcohol abuse on campus. Our public safety office reports that more than half the calls they receive—more than half of all their calls—are related to alcohol or substance abuse.

Most frightening is the long-term impact binge drinking has on one's brain and its development. Researchers have found that alcohol can do serious and irreparable harm to a teen's and young adult's brain. In a study completed by a team of neuroscientists, individuals aged 21-24, who drank enough to attain blood alcohol levels just below the legal limit (just below .08), recorded greater incidences of brain impairment—that is, a decrease in the ability to learn new information, form memories, and perform cognitive functions—than individuals who drank the same amount and were only four years older. This research supports the long-held view that alcohol has a significant destructive impact on the development of the brain before one reaches one's mid-20s.

One has to wonder why, if the implications of irresponsible drinking are so clear, bright and aspiring individuals resort to binge drinking and using hard alcohol to the extent they do? The impact of such drinking, as self-reported by our own first-years, is quite evident and not buried only in scientific journals. Almost a third of our first-years who took part in a survey on alcohol use said that within two weeks of completing the survey they had experienced a blackout—a period of amnesia that can last for seconds, minutes, hours, and/or days that prohibits the natural development of memory and recollection of recent events.

It is interesting to hypothesize as to why this generation in particular has taken the *work hard, play hard* approach to life in college to the extremes it has. Some who have written on the subject believe it is the need to release pressure that students feel coming from their parents who, ironically, or perhaps explicably, grew up during social and civil rights movements and now feel compelled to provide for their children the very structures and limits they fought to remove; others see it as a reaction to the pressure caused by increased competition for jobs and opportunities brought about by globalization; and others, still, including many students with whom I have spoken during the past three years, believe it is simply a function of the current work and activity load at Middlebury, which, I agree may very well be out of whack. The great amount of work assigned by our faculty, they argue, prevents many students from pursuing a healthy day-to-day balance between work and non-work activities, which creates the kind of pressure cooker that is best relieved by intense drinking.

The overall impact of binge drinking that is part and parcel of the new, self-destructive *work hard, play hard* approach to college life is the diminishing of what one learns and experiences at a place like Middlebury. It prevents the integration of many of our international

students, who openly wonder why students who are so smart in class, appear to be so dumb out of class when it comes to how they socialize and use alcohol. This obsession with extreme alcohol consumption is foreign to so many students from different cultures on our campus. It results in less interaction and engagement within the study body, which translates into missed opportunities for students to hear different perspectives on the arts, politics, and life in general, and to learn about vastly different cultures that coexist on our campus. In other words, it leads to behavior that interferes with the larger, loftier, goals of a liberal arts education.

Recognizing our own inability to counteract, to date, the emergence of this new, self-destructive *work hard, play hard* culture gives us some guidance on how to be more effective in dealing with this challenge. For us, as an institution of higher education, responsible for providing the best possible liberal arts education, our limited success so far calls upon us to rely more on student leadership and peer pressure than on administrative policies and programs. Administrative directives can't get us very far when the socialization among newly entering students into the newer version of *work hard, play hard* is so strikingly quick – or has taken place before students arrive here. Students themselves need to be a large part of the solution, and some have already shown how effective their involvement can be.

A good example of effective student leadership was that exercised by this year's Feb orientation leaders, largely sophomores and juniors who volunteer to help orient incoming Febs adjust to entering the College mid-year. During several lunches at the president's house with this year's entering Febs, just about every student mentioned how their orientation leaders took charge of the drinking issue on their own accord, not as directed by administrators. They encouraged their charges to respect the drinking laws, and mentored them when peer pressure to drink in excess began to mount. This is the kind of guidance and support for younger students we will need to engender among more upperclassmen, if we are to reduce irresponsible drinking and create the respectful environment we desire and expect for our students.

For you, as young adults about to graduate into the so-called "real world," the stubborn persistence of this culture highlights the importance for you, as individuals, to take some degree of moral responsibility for the behavior of fellow members of whatever community you choose to live in. This will require you to take seriously the importance of building communities in which standards of decency, self-respect, and respect towards others are upheld by those in it.

This insight, about the relationship between, on the one hand, the opportunity to live fulfilling, dynamic, and enriching lives, and, on the other, the need for an individual's deep, strong commitments to the values of one's community, is not a new one. Aristotle helped us to begin thinking about this issue more than two thousand years ago. And as with all such profound insights about human civilization, every generation must figure out for itself how to apply such wisdom to one's own era.

For you, the graduating class of 2008, I would offer the following:

Do not accept self-destructive behavior from your friends and peers. You would not have come to college here in the first place, nor exercised the diligence and focus necessary to complete your degree, had you not believed firmly in the values of a liberal arts education. Believing in the liberal arts means you believe in learning, in the lifelong worth and possibility of personal growth and engagement in the world around you.

Our world today needs you and your generation to combat the self-destructiveness of extreme behaviors with the creation and support of communities characterized by individuals watching out for one another. We look to you, now steeped in the life-affirming values of the liberal arts, to work hard and play hard with wisdom into the future.

Congratulations and best wishes as you embark on the next exciting chapter of your lives.

Ronald D. Liebowitz	baccalaureate	Baccalaureate 2008	Class of 2008
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